

The public vs. private school choice debate: pluralism and recognition in education

*Valeria Fabretti*¹

Abstract: Behind the families and communities of many Western countries, pressing politicians to promote a system of free school choice, one can recognize a criticism towards the idea of uniformity in education and the proposal of a school that is aware and respectful of the specific normative, cultural and religious systems in which students are involved. From this point of view, the issue of secondary school choice reflects in the educational field the wider problem of normative pluralism and the recognition of different identities in society. The paper describes how both European policies and the academic debate have taken account of this particular point, considering the implications of school pluralism with regards to young people's independence, citizenship and social cohesion. We suggest that by putting the issue in such terms, even before we can draw any conclusions on the best way to regulate the private school sector, we could learn useful "lessons" for rethinking the educational model of state schools. In the Italian case, especially, the main lesson to be learned seems to be that students' individual, socio-cultural, ethnic and religious differences ought to be "taken seriously" in order to foster the construction of young people's identity, autonomy and citizenship.

Keywords: Pluralism and Multicultural Societies; Recognition; School Choice; Common/Denominational schools; Values, Religions and Civic Education.

¹ PhD in Sociology. Correspondence details: Via Angelo Messedaglia, 42 – 00191 Roma (Italy); valeria.fabretti@uniroma1.it

Pluralism of Vs pluralism *into* school institutions: “struggles for recognition” in pluralistic societies and issues in education

A new attention is largely arising towards educating contents and practices together with the value dimension underlining the experiences offered by school institutions in western societies. Such an interest, sometimes associated with concern or even social alarm regarding youth and adolescent condition (Pietropolli & Charmet, 2000), seems to derive from the idea of weaknesses of the school system (Dubet, 2002; 2007). Besides, models moulding the building up of school systems in National States, which are focused on the univocal profile of “institutional programme” (*ibidem*), show increasing problems in standing up to the new antinomies pervading the pluralistic societies. Actually, a new reflection on *Bildung* is widely feeding on issues relating to the way the school project – and its governance as well – can enter into a dialogue with the manifold forms of diversity represented by a more and more heterogeneous student population.

As for this reflection, the subject of *school choice* provides a particularly fertile ground. The *school choice* expression is largely used to refer to various aspects of the non-state school statute, its relation with public institutions, and the double “freedom” for private subjects to find this kind of school and for families to choose them. As largely known, such an issue has characterized in the past decades the political debate about school as well as the work of many educationalists, and it requires many topics to be dealt with: from the *quality* of school service to the *equity* of its functioning (Brighouse, 2000, Gleen & De Groof, 2004). The question indeed – for what is concerned here – has to do with a crucial *querelle* regarding normative pluralism and the kind of education and values schools should promote in a democratic society. Let me try to clarify this point.

Pressures in favour of a liberalization of school supply and demand, mainly when exercised with reference to a specific confessional and/or cultural feature of the education project, question the very idea of the *common school*: a single institutional structure, pluralistic inside, where social, economic and cultural differences of both teachers and students are included in a common formal and legal order (“pluralism *in* institutions”). Such an idea is linked to the prevailing story of modern schooling; the idea is also linked to the shift from an elite setup to a “mass” one (Dei, 2000) and it is connected to the task of building up national identities through the education of young “citizens” and to the democratic values, together with the sense of belonging to a State (Barbagli, 1974; Dubet, 2002; Glenn, 2003). The direction of a *school choice* implies – sometimes in a radical way – a re-

shaping of the above vision of school public space and the educational project of this institution.

Pluralism is used here as a principle of the organization of the education system in different types of schools (“pluralism of institutions”) that is led back to various actors. In this institutional framework the teaching programs, as well as the cultural and value-contents of school are expressed according to homogeneous educational projects. The programs are shaped by specific culture, philosophy or religious creed whose basic direction can be shared by teachers, students and their families (Benadusi, 1996). Moreover, such diversification doesn’t suit the mere division of public-private, better referring, at least in principle, to the more or less radical application of a *polycontextuality*² connecting different laws and regulations to different symbolic universes (Teubner, 1999).

Positions referred to as “pluralism of institutions” can be interpreted as alternatives resulting from a criticism to the model of state school. This is considered ineffective in representing and “mediating” the several socializing visions linked to the social, cultural, ethnic and religious heterogeneity of its users. What we define today as a radicalized expression of a former demand of education is first founded on an evident weakness which may be resolved by restoring the priority of *consonance* between the kind of educational supply and the peculiarity of a certain demand.

In such terms, the issue of the school choice should be understood placing it in a wider scenario. Many elements *endogenous* and *exogenous*, relevant to the same school system, have obviously helped shape the ground where the political, institutional and cultural terms of the “free choice” have emerged. Among the former we should recall the internal growth of high school education (Arum, Gamoran & Shavit, 2006), while among the latter the incisiveness of globalization has played its role together with the whole of ideas referred to as neo-liberalism that have increased their international weight through this very process so leading to the proposal of *de-regulation* (Cobalti, 2006). But, as it is highlighted later on, the matter of recognition “via-education” of cultural and religious identities plays a meaningful role in education policies of schooling externalization (*contracting-out*) achieved in Europe as well as in the cultural and scientific debate going with them. Considering this aspect of the matter, the school

² Teubner (1999) uses the concept to account for a social universe made of a irreconcilable plurality, within which the coordination and stabilization of institutional arrangements necessarily require the use of multiple perspectives.

choice appears to translate into educational language, with some implications involved in the social, cultural and prescriptive pluralism affecting our societies.

Assumed as a “fact”, to use a well known statement by Rawls, pluralism means the multiform expression of a *variety* of orientations that is the consequence of identity expressions, both individual and collective, interweaving our society. The very identity difference is assumed as a value and as the core reasoning in explaining the individual and collective behaviour (Hannertz, 2001, Colombo, 2006). Due to its normative connotation, pluralism implies in principle that political and juridical spheres are able to cope with dialectics between the space of public sovereignty, by definition unitary and universalistic, and the space of subjects and social groups, where the very difference is assumed as the central principle and right (Young, 2002). In such a frame, the various social actors and their needs gravitate towards a new definition of *public space*. This questions the modern solutions to the issues of justice and tolerance, based on the idea of state regulation, citizenship and representation, denouncing their actual deficiency in effectiveness (Lanzillo, 2001).

So, the debate related to the management of pluralism leads to the issue of *recognition* of rights and dignity. Such debate also acknowledges individuals, groups and communities and their demands, together with the deriving implications within the democratic systems (Taylor, 1993, Honneth, 2002). Within modern systems, politics is asked by the very “struggles for recognition” to accomplish identities permeating social spheres (Sennet 1977; Habermas & Taylor, 2002; Honnet, 2002); its basic difficulty is to read the results into several tensions currently involving the relationship between social groups and public institutions.

In the ongoing debate about principles and practices of education, such tensions are expressed by discussion about the universalistic model of state-school-culture and its neutrality opposed to the choice of precise culture and value references, for a more effective contribution to the young generations’ growth. These references show continuity and consistency with students’ family and community contexts according to their particular traditions – ethnic, cultural, or religious. In other words, the dilemma arises between the parents’ and communities’ right to educate young people according to their beliefs, recognized in a *denominational* – instead of neutral – school offer, on one hand; and the institutional task assigned to the universalistic state-school to mould autonomous individuals and citizens of democratic states, on the other. This dilemma, even if not only typical of present time, has acquired a particular importance within the scientific pro-

duction and the public eye, since also nurtured by the media, which is closely connected to the increasing social, cultural, ethnic and religious heterogeneity reshaping western societies.

Therefore, the “intra vs inter-education pluralism” *querelle* implies important issues not only regarding the political management and *governance* of the education system, but also a level closer to “content matters”, as Deuret calls them, that is the reflection about the various principles that can guide the school education in pluralistic societies and the selection between them (Deuret, 2003, p. 64). The following paragraphs aims to lead the present contribution across these two levels. We aim to highlight how the normative discourse – the role of values and ideals in orienting demand and offer of schools – is largely taken into account both in the political European arena and in the academic debate. We suggest that by putting the issue in such terms, even before draw conclusions on the best way to regulate the private school sector, we should take “lessons” useful in rethinking the educational model in place in state schools – especially in the Italian case –.

Systemic pluralism between school establishments in Europe

The role of the state is central in the history of western modern education. The overall pre-eminence of state-school-system in Europe is seen as the result of the theoretical and practical exercise of representative sovereignty. This shaped the way of thinking in modern political rationalism, originated from Enlightenment and with a universalistic vocation (Galli, 2006). All over Europe we can recognize pluralistic school systems where families choose public financing, directly and/or indirectly, quite often after a decennial coexistence between public and private schools (Dronkers, Felouzis & van Zanten, 2010).

A wider converging revision process on government education influenced this structure; a process that, according to the post-bureaucratic model (Benadusi & Consoli, 2004; Maroy, 2009), has achieved some prevailing courses which are featured differently or are alternative to one another. More autonomy is assigned to public schools (Serpieri, 2009), and decentralization and education services are assigned to private schools, or structures held by the so called “third sector”³. In Italy adopted models are

³ It is widely underlined how such whole process features a “mid-way convergence” on whose basis historically centralized school systems (France, Spain, Greece, Italy) try to introduce elements of flexibility and manoeuvring for the education offer, while more de-

far from a drastic reduction of state intervention on education management, and far from a complete resort to the market as a regulating mechanism, somehow approaching the idea of “like-market” or of “evaluative state” (Benadusi & Consoli 2004). The right to establish private schools generally coexists with state authority to inspect these schools and exercise *accountability*, as for programs, teaching times and methods together with an overall effectiveness of the system, in comparison with nationally defined standards.

This caution in school choice policies, as claimed by US scholars looking for examples and solutions to be imported (Wolf & Macedo, 2004), testifies which attention European governments have paid towards possible implications of educational pluralism regarding social justice, citizenship and social cohesion (De Groof & Glenn, 2002; Glenn & De Groof, 2004; Wolf & Macedo, 2004). Even if prominent in the USA, the argument of the benefits of educational market, and of the competition between schools cannot properly answer to questions connected to school choice in the European debate. Here the problem is hardly separated from its ethical implications, and from rights and duties linked to education – as stated in several treaties ratified at national and international level. Also, the problem is not separated from acknowledgement to be distributed among minority and majority groups – particularly for religious affiliation – and from interpreting their role on the public scene to reach shared social and civic aims (Wolf & Macedo, 2004).

This peculiar character of the European approach to the issue of school choice makes this “political observatory” particularly interesting, in my opinion, for a better understanding of this topic.

The differences towards educational systems and regulation of school choice reflect the nations’ particular history and public culture, as well as conceptions about the proper relations between groups and the state or the political community as a whole (*ibidem*). However, most European countries may give a right of choice to parents, funding, at least partially, non-state recognized schools. At the same time, especially in regulating students’ selection and teachers’ recruitment, European solutions consider the implications that educational freedom of schools can have on social

centralized systems (United Kingdom and Germany) tend to counterbalance the differences among schools at a local level by coordinating and centralizing (Fischer, 2003; Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006; Maroy, 2009). According to several analysis education reform processes in the last decades reasonably seem to make school systems more varied instead of more uniform depending on the fact that they are more controlled by local instances and/or particular cultural projects (Cobalti, 2006).

justice (De Groof & Gleen, 2002; Glenn & De Groof 2004). Moreover, in many cases, public funding for private schools coexist with the exercise of state authority for accountability, compliance programs, timetables, teaching methods and effectiveness of the system in relation to parameters defined at the national level (De Groof & Gleen, 2002; Glenn & De Groof 2004).

Broadly speaking, it is possible to specify a three-part division of European countries (Eurydice, 2000; 2007; Dronkers, Felouzis, van Zanten, 2010).

In the first wider group of countries – among which Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland and Sweden – private education is publicly supported, partially or totally, working under more or less the same conditions as the state school, sharing many common features with it. Especially in Belgium, Denmark and in the Netherlands an almost equivalent statute is granted to non state school in comparison with public school. Equivalence concerns both public financing, which excludes that students should pay for school fees, and the autonomous determination to appoint teachers and determine their salaries. Equivalence also excludes all working hours and teaching methods, respecting parameters referring to national curriculum. Besides, a strong state control is carried out by the school system Department with similar methods in each of those countries.

In the second group of countries: Greece, Scotland, and partly England and Wales, private school cannot rely on public financing. The cost weighs entirely on families through fees, which are otherwise covered by private grants; the fact that the fees are paid by the families and not public financing does not exempt the state from exercising a certain control on such education sector.

In the third group, which includes France, Italy, and Portugal, non state sector is supported by Government through different kinds of “contracts”, providing ties for non state schools – for instance, in teachings or in teachers recruitment – proportionate to their public founding.

This initial frame gives a “classic” representation of European policies about the relationships between public and private schools⁴. However, ana-

⁴ Further attention should be given to Eastern Europe countries and, more strictly, to those that recently joined the European Union (Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, *etc.*) where postcommunist reformers have paid an increasing attention to education privatisation. Starting from the Glenn’ Report – Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe (1995) – which interpreted the development of school choice issue as a significant vehicle for the revival of civil society in the Soviet bloc nations, several studies have highlight some interesting aspects of the privatization trend (Beresford-Hill, 1998; Mincu, 2009). These issues are for instance re-

lyzing in detail some cases among the most significant of the three macro-types, the same scene is featured differently from what one could expect.

In the Netherlands, as widely known, the freedom of education is one of the major characteristics of the school system, and it is intended in a dual way (Vermeulen, 2004). First, as freedom provided by the Constitution, for individuals, groups and associations to establish and manage schools in accordance with personal religious, philosophical or pedagogic principles and to give these institutions a distinguished mark (*vrijheid van richting*). Secondly, as the parents' freedom to choose schools that best satisfy their educational purposes without being burdened with charges (*ibidem*).

One of the directions to be considered is to understand the peculiarity of such context, where liberalization of education supply and demand is not featured only in a market sense, is the constituent link to the great religious and philosophical groups, rooted in territories entrusted to perform functions addressed by citizenship (Walford, 1995; Monsma & Scoper, 1997). According to some authors, the present results of confessional schools in Holland – mostly Catholic and Protestant – would derive not only from the quality of services supplied, but also from the trust earned by this kind of proposed culture and value of socialization (Dijkstra & Dronkers, 2003; Dijkstra, Dronkers & Karsten, 2004). Yet, starting from the 90's, such models revealed several critical elements, as expressed in the political debate, or in the government decisions and in some Dutch Court sentences. First of all, the need to restrict the educational pluralism came to better "sift out" many groups from establishing and financing schools. This was done in answer to the growing social alarm for the non-integration of religious and ethnic minorities. Also, the restrictions came about as possible consequences of segregation driven by the current system of education together with the prospective separatism or hostility by some of the religious and ethnic minorities. (Vermeulen, 2004). The reference is, for instance, to some internal Islamic traditions, different from those already recognized by governments, which may suggest student values not entirely tuning with the basic principles of western societies. In these cases, the institutions in charge of education had to deal with the recognition of the right to establish schools by groups or movements by virtue of an assessment of their actual "educational difference", and with the legitimacy of selection procedure

lated to the coexistence of global-european guiding principles and national-local ideologies and identities, on the one hand; and to the link between the recent rhetoric of "democratic education" and the decentralization process, which involved a diversification of educational provisions and institutions, on the other hand (*ibidem*).

adopted by denominational schools towards students. It is significant that, against the difficult outcome of its model, the Dutch Government has in the recent years gradually underlined that the school has to have an integrating function. The State, with its authority, has defined some minimum standards to be observed within any school context, for instance, the tolerance and respect of all different viewpoints (Vermeulen, 2004).

In the first group of countries where private education operates under the same conditions as the public sector, significant variations are present to the sharp alternative between denominational and non denominational schools. In this regard the German case is meaningful. Forms of co-partnership – or *multi level governance* (Shachar, 2001) – were devised and achieved between public institutions and religious groups in the education offered by various institutes. In the Berlin Land in particular, within the state schools, several religious communities may exercise a specific authority by teaching religious disciplines in classes *ad hoc* (*ibidem*; Reuter, 2004). These segments of curriculum, even based on different “creeds”, have to reflect the basic Constitutional values, usually including a wide range of issues concerning philosophical and social themes and visions (*ibidem*).

Only partially referring to the second group of countries, where private education is a service for which families are required to pay, the cases of England and Wales are interesting because of processes of change affecting educational policies and the cultural patterns that seem to orient them. Historically marked by a decentralized institutional structure and very strong school autonomy, the British educational system includes education, with a range of schools gradually diversified, which is publicly financed; and a private area where families are obliged to pay. Here the educational market has been shaped by policies inspired by like-market model. In summary, competition among schools and freedom of choice and its elements, is able to increase the quality of the educational system (Dronkers, Felouzis & van Zanten, 2010). However, this system has undergone a changing process in the 90s, characterized by a partial reinforcement of central power against Local Educational Authorities (Fassari, 2004). These changes caused the release of family school choice from family’s residence (*de-zoning*), together with the defining of a National Curriculum and a gradual skill and competence standardization (Landri, 2004) and the introduction of national control and assessment bodies. Even if the English political approach to education has dealt with the school-choice issue with a particular care for quality, as shown by the late Labour governments’ action to avoid social exclusion of the educational market (Gorard, 2004; Fassari, 2004), it is

broadly reported that the attention for rights and respect for individual opinions and the alert of prospective critical situations are gradually emerging (Hargreaves, 1996; Harris, 2004; Walford, 2000; Roverselli, 2008). One of the reasons for the former aspect is the importance achieved by the introduction of Human Rights Act (1998) with strong implications on the British legal and political agenda. The second aspect, principally focused on the increasing demand for “faith-based” schools mainly by Muslim groups (Roverselli, 2008), is to be seen within the late critical debate about the British multiculturalism model (Kearns & Bannister, 2009), historically based on tolerance and respect of communitarian traditions and of cultural and ethnic specificities as well. These are problems linked to the necessary protection of social cohesion while respecting the pluralistic features of societies with different creeds and religious institutions (Hargreaves, 1996; Harris, 2004). As in the rest of Europe, the latest actions primarily aim at pledging in both sectors, public and private, a stable ground of civic and social values where to carry on the students’ growth process (*ibidem*; Roverselli, 2008).

The most meaningful of the third group of countries is the French case. The French example is related to the cultural and philosophical frame of the “secularization and citizenship” (Levinson, 1999), centred on egalitarianism, statism and a secular and neutral conception of public space. This traditionally pervaded the issue of education with some basic tendencies. Between the main, a great propensity toward aims of civic order requires to provide the youth of a symbolic structure to support their membership and loyalty to the national community. Moreover, this propensity explains the increased attention given to the type of educational project for schools, rather than the rights of parental choice (Meuret, 2004). Yet, in the last decade the French system, together with a gradual autonomy of the school, has introduced measures to increase the possibility of school choice for families, releasing them from the rules of the catchment area (Bottani, 2007; van Zanten & Obin, 2008). The present situation is based on a system largely allowing public financing of existing private schools, but making it quite difficult to found new ones. Private schools, indeed, may be publicly financed only if they can prove the actual need for their contribution to education (*un besoin scolaire reconnu*), and if they will not apply selection methods to recruit students.

The point “private vs public school” is still debated in French political life. The late problems and sometimes harsh discussions linked to the issue of religious expressions within state schools – *l’affaire du foulard islamique*, in particular (Bowen, 2007; Benhabib, 2008) – are evidence of ten-

sions pervading the school system in the last decade, centred on the historical controversy between State and Catholic Church, and not used to take into consideration thicker expressions of cultural and religious differences. Generally speaking, it is the very French national identity to be questioned in the face of social integration and resistances to the traditionally *assimilationist* model to manage diversities. These resistances have been shown by groups more and more defining their own identity in religious terms (*ibidem*).

Like the French education system, the Italian one played an essential role in the political structuring of the country. Such process aimed at the democratization of the “state” school – term for a long time equivalent to “public” school in the collective imaginary –. Against the public school there is a long standing presence of school institutions related to the Catholic Church, mainly, even if not only, quite elitist. The gradual strengthening of a national school system, centralized and neutral, took place, in post-fascist period, within a still fragmented social texture, in a cultural frame not disposed to grant families a prominent role in defining education courses (Riboldi, 2004). The controversial issue referring to the state/non state school was which role to assign to private institutions in spreading public values (*ibidem*), and what is the degree of autonomy to the latter from the state; this problem has been largely discussed in the contentious debate about the point of public founding as formulated in the Constitution.

Only in the 90s, indeed, the issue of school choice and the non-state sector regulation found its place in the political agenda (*ibidem*). This was discussed as part of a wider review of the centralized school system, matching the core issue of autonomy reform. According to the law n. 62/2000⁵, and subsequent guidelines, the Italian school system provides for educational services formally “comparable”, as an expression of differentiated offers in a frame of shared objectives and rules. The formula of “National Education System” actually includes both state and non state schools – established by private individuals, religious institutions or local administrations – with their demand acknowledged as “equal”, that is to say able to supply a “public” service to all purposes. It requires non state schools that apply for such statute to respect a number of conditions and parameters fixed at national level. These are linked to funds provided for by yearly financial laws – gradually increased from 2001 until now – “equal” schools financing is implemented in different ways- agreements, tax reductions, “bonus”, “vouch-

⁵ Law n. 62, March 10, 2000, “Norme per la Parità scolastica e disposizioni sul diritto allo studio e all’istruzione”, in G.U. n. 67, 2000.

ers” and support to students and families – mainly decided by the Local Government.

In the matter of our present interests, the Italian solution tries to deal with two principles: the legitimization of distinguished education offered by non-state schools, on the one hand, and the attention to core, shared values, common to the whole national community, on the other. The same law n. 62/2000 underlines both the “complete freedom” for cultural orientation and the possible religious inspiration of private education, and, among the necessary requirements, an “education project formulated according to the principles of the Constitution”⁶. Yet, in our country, the prevailing clerical education in the private field and the weak process of ethnic and religious pluralism, only recently accelerated, making it more immature the issue of minority religious revendication about education; although, as one might recall, in recent years several significant cases have covered our chronicles⁷.

In the end, one can draw some remarks about the European landscape.

First, at the European level it doesn’t seem possible to find univocal solutions and/or blueprints. The majority of the models seem to be the result of an attempted balance between two sides: the first side, the state regulating power to “contain” the fragmentation resulting from an excessively free translation of “identity combinations” in school proposals, one inconsistent with the other; the second side, a wider diversified educational offer with possible choice by students, families and communities, according to the different ways to consider school. Both, the needed recognition of various cultures and traditions present in societies, and the possible risks that such action may imply for common life and social cohesion are taken into account (De Groof & Gleen, 2002; Glenn & De Groof 2004; Wolf & Macedo, 2004). It should be noted that this last attention nowadays is typical also to those contexts, such as Netherlands and Belgium, that had historically favoured the first one. The political solutions applied in Europe and their endurance referred to social environment and changes are threatened by the tensions, due especially in the past decades to increasing multiculturalism and multi-religiousness of western countries, together with the different re-

⁶ See: c.3, art.1.

⁷ After the case of the “Agnesi” high school in Milan, well known for the proposal of special classes for Muslim students, in the same city, on June 2005, emerged the controversy about the public recognition of a school with an Egyptian cultural character, including in its training in the teaching of Islam. An even larger area of public debate has been occupied recently by the question of the symbolic religious qualification of school environments: the case of the crucifix in public school classrooms. See: Marchisio, 2005.

lationship between state, religion and democracy (Kymlicka, 1999). It signals that educational policies and systems cannot be self-referring while they should be read through *exogenous* explanations.

Indeed, through school choice, the political regulation of the educational system is fraught with complexity and procedures. This regulation, as public policies generally do, grants requests from the social environment and gives them an institutional space in a historically and culturally oriented way. It proves, thus, the desirability of some *value-based* models of education instead of others (Walford, 1996). Present trends seem to show the increased weight of *selection* in states' recognition of different groups and particularly religious communities, to enter or/and remain in the public sphere of education.

Schools as communities of values? Behind “private Vs public” school choice

As for policies, even for the scientific approach the issue of school choice implies a confrontation on how to perceive pluralism in education. Particularly, a meaningful area of the debate is questioned. On one hand, the requirements for recognition and cultural continuity coming from individuals, families and communities towards the education system, and, on the other hand, the school's responsibilities for the building up of ethical profiles of new generations and citizens. A wide range of contributions to be ascribed to the “pluralism of institutions” differs both from a vision of school choice as the result of strategic-instrumental rational choices, by the “clients” of the “educational market”, and from a representation of education as a “private property”; those are two aspects peculiar to the neo-liberalist logic. The emerging kind of choice, on the contrary, shows a typical *expressive* quality (Hargreaves & Al., 1996), as it is linked to the satisfaction of a need of identity confirmation, implying a predominant value in building up individual and collective judgement and action (Weber, 1968; Elster, 1983; Habermas, 1986). Even if the practices of school choice can distance themselves from it, one can suggest that this line of reasoning and the linked visions of school education represent the most theoretical *thick* objection advanced by private education to the prevailing state-school model established in our societies.

In this sense, as already said, the issue of educational choices brings to face a momentous theoretical confrontation, where one can wonder about which kind of school and quality of education can better ensure student's

personal and democratic growth, educating at the same time autonomy, identity and citizenship.

Let's now consider some pieces of the theoretical framework in which one must fill the idea of school choice as oriented by normative criteria, and let's proceed by relating them to the heavier criticisms that have been widely advanced against the demands for "freedom of choice".

Particularly, a double risk has been largely identified. First, exasperated particularistic dimensions of identity, envisaged by institution, and the spreading of denominational schools, would lead to the separation and distinction of groups and communities, rather than settling interests for living together; second, individual autonomy would be stifled by paternalistic education, tightened between family and school, and by the traditionalism deeply rooted into particular cultures (Benadusi, 1996; Levinson & Levinson, 2003).

As for the first topic, education projects marketed by compliance with particular expressions of identity— mainly religious ones — may be shaped according to an excessive "cultural compactness", also guaranteed by a narrow teacher and student recruitment, consistent with the necessary reproduction of certain social groups, and fighting against the formation of democratic society's core ideals of education, as respect for diversity and *civiness* (Benadusi, 1996). This criticism has been often considered appealing to the language of "political liberalism" coined by Rawls (1993), caring to mould neutral public ethics through education, which is suitable to democratic and pluralistic societies (Callan, 1995; Benadusi, 1996). Any project of education deriving from a "comprehensive" vision — secular or religious whatsoever — evened out on "comprehensive" conceptions of man and society incapable of "reasonableness", is to be considered a sort of private project, and it is unfit to satisfy the requirements for "public justification" of principles of justice, on which a steady democratic order can be solely established (Rawls, 1993). Public school institutions should be charged with the socialization of "public reason", which is necessary to conciliate the "fact of pluralism" with necessary the stability and integration of differentiated and multicultural societies (*ibidem*). Besides, this kind of criticism argues that the same "pluralism of education institutions" claimed by supporters of Catholic or Protestant schools, should be applied to other religious groups, as the Muslim one, sometimes showing a not only religious but also ethical and cultural diversity much harder to be reconciled with the minimum integration requirements of western societies (Benadusi, 1996). As already said, this crucial issue has moved the European policies of school choice in the past decades.

If these considerations deal with contents of school education, which should entirely express the valued priority of democratic citizens (*public sphere*) against the particular identity and recognition of cultural differences (*private sphere*), other arguments support the *common school* model, which considers the students' relationship. A heterogeneous student population could contribute to shape *civiness* and tolerance (Walford, 1996; Slee, 2001), as often recalled in studies concerning the so called "school mix" (Gorard, 2007). Division implied in denominational schools would affect the cultural sphere of acquaintance and familiarity with diversity, compromising the possibility for children and youths to learn how to live together with different cultures democratically, and following social routes inevitably inhabited by plurality (Pring, 2007).

The second criticism – concerning with individual autonomy – refers to "incompatibility by principle" between different rights (Somaini, 1997). The family right linked to the expression of its preferences⁸ and the youth's priority, to ensure his possibility of self-determining his own path cultivating *critical ability* (Levinson, 1999; Brighouse, 2000; British Humanist Association, 2001; Callan e White, 2007; Reich, 2007). People to be educated have to develop their self-understanding by pursuing autonomous goals, meanwhile they should acquire the widest possible vision of diversity – human, cultural, related to lifestyles, which is typical of our societies, in order to assess this vision through an informed and reflexive thought (Callari Galli, Cambi & Ceruti, 2003; Mortari, 2003; Callan e White, 2007; Colombo & Varani, 2008).

In this perspective, plurality within the institution of education is considered a warranty for diversities linked to individualism more than to attain collective goals. As in Touraine (1998, pp. 297-9), an "open" school, which is able to favour cultural diversity among students, together with an activity moulding their subjective dimension, is necessarily a public and secular school, searching for heterogeneity and diversity rather than communitarian unity.

Studies identified as the theoretical background of the mentioned idea of school choice – a value-oriented choice – are to be considered an answer to these remarks, whose assumptions they essentially reverse.

⁸ In Brown (1990), the "ideology of parentocracy" marks the "Third Wave" of the socio-historical development of education in Britain, but also in USA, Australia and New Zealand. This shift is described as "the move towards a system whereby the education a child receives must conform to the wealth and wishes of parent rather than the abilities and efforts of pupils" (*ivi*, p.65).

As for the social cohesion problem, it is suggested that delivery of schooling to different actors of civil community would not prevent education from keeping meaningful collective purposes. Rather, this delivery better qualifies education as a tool, which is able to introduce young people into pluralistic and democratic societies. This is achieved by their participation in specific “meaning communities”, endowing them with qualities difficult to be nourished in school environments claiming to be neutral (Ribolzi & Maccarini, 2003; Donati & Colozzi, 2006). In this sense, the criticism against parameters traditionally orienting state school educational project is based on the idea of a “common culture” which is too abstract, and it is released from the visions of “Good” of various traditions and communities to which families and students belong, if not conflicting with them (Glenn, 1988; Holmes, 1992; 1995).

A substantial theoretical support to such arguments is given by the number of studies that starting from the 80s analysed school outcome, considering the positive value of social links built up in a “functional community” school (Coleman, Hoffer, Kilgore, 1982; Coleman, Hoffer, 1987; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). The research has identified an “added value” in US denominational schools that is to say a positive influence exercised on students’ results explained by values shared among parents, teachers and students in an atmosphere characterized by a positive *ethos*. Beyond the influence on students’ performances of the so called “Catholic school effect” (Bryk, Lee Holland, 1995)⁹, it is interesting to focus on how these studies show in the considered schools the institutional and organizing translation of specifically communitarian qualities, as the rich net of interpersonal relationships able to generate *social capital* (Coleman, 1990). Schools could cooperate to create and strengthen such goods if aware of how important it is to introduce youths into the closest adults’ enclave: their family and their community/ies around them (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). The core aspect is creating an atmosphere of cultural uniformity among the main actors concurring in different ways to perform the educational projects of the new generations (Hoffer, 2000, Ribolzi, 2003; Ribolzi, Maccarini, 2003). Sharing a set of beliefs about what students should learn, about proper teaching methods and about different relations among the involved subjects, results in a coherent organizing culture, and in teachers’ joint work, which is due to a common “moral” interpretation of their own role (Bryk, Lee, Holland,

⁹ This problem has been faced by a rich set of studies, questioning basically methodological criteria of Coleman et al.’ researches, as for the kind of data collected. See, for instance: Neal, 1997.

1993; Yancey, 2000)¹⁰. Clearly, it is an organizational management of the school that is opposite to the “bureaucratic- hierarchic” one and to the “professional specialization”, and it is more akin to the “network management” or “like-community” model (Benadusi & Consoli, 2004).

Another set of studies that stresses the effects of these features within denominational – mainly “faith based” – schools in leading students disposition to the *common good* can be found in the British context. They particularly reflect some cultural attentions related to traditional multiculturalism and tolerant paradigm typical of this country. On the whole, it is highlighted how achieving a specific identity does not necessarily correspond to rejection of diversity or, even worse, to attitudes of integralism. The *inspirational ideology* of religious schools largely suits goals of equality when promoting values such as personal dignity, solidarity and commitment to create a “right” society. This also creates the fundamental principles of democracy and social development (Grace 2000; 2002). Besides, the presence of religious schools would be the consequence of the inclusion of different communities into national and local democratic processes (Hargreaves, 1994) on one hand, while, on the other hand, it is supposed to strengthen a peculiar kind of social cohesion within different communities. This is considered a necessary requirement in any pluralistic society even to reach broader circles of “concentric identities”, such as the national one (Hargreaves, 1996). Moreover, some studies – particularly those concerning minority religious groups – underline how attending schools intended for them helps rather than thwarts their social integration process, getting them used to their new residence country’s democratic institutions and to public spirit (Lewis, 1997; Werbner, 2000).

So, as mentioned before, the issue of possible tensions and identity conflicts in pluralistic societies is fully accounted for as the necessary safeguard of cohesion. The most suitable way of working this issue out is identified in widening the education pluralism rather than restraining it, and considering the social importance of a culturally and ethically oriented education (Glenn, 2001) together with the socializing experiences gained in schools meant as “value communities” (Ribolzi, 2003, p. 220).

In regards to the theme of individual autonomy, the defense of a non neutral education is based on the argument, also referring to Kymlicka

¹⁰ In explicit connection to the U.S. literature on social capital, a research conducted recently in our country review the outcome of non-state schools as areas of socialization capable of producing a rich relational dimension and, therefore, different forms of social capital: the familiar one, the communitarian one and the civic or generalized one (Donati & Colozzi, 2006).

(1999), of the importance of cultural affiliations in the autonomous development of personal identity. Moving from the link between the cognitive and the ethical dimensions within the child development process, this approach assumes that the critical capacity, that has to be exercised in society at large, is due to the mediation conducted by a strict relational dimension (Ribolzi, 2004).

On the philosophical and pedagogical ground, this position is supported by some *communitarian* contributions, which underline the importance of the subject's social integration in the process of building up their personality, together with the "cultural continuity" between school, family and their communities (Mincu, 2007). It is an interpretation of identity not far from the idea of a "constitutive Self" (Seligman, 2003; Rosati, 2009). The idea of autonomy defended here is enhanced by the attribute of *authenticity*, for which – as described by Taylor – the Self is embedded in heterogeneous frames of normative and in their set of meanings. Therefore, learning for autonomy training cannot be separated from the extra-curricular learning and from the effects of students' different traditions, which the state school model would dissolve by offering a homogeneity that would turn into *standardization* of education criteria and methods (Mincu, 2007).

Also in some liberal reflections (Gutmann, 1980; Levinson 1999; Levinson & Levinson, 2003), where the contrast between favouring an autonomous identity or a "community identity" is lighter, the core importance of cultural coherence for personal identity (even more important than the community rights) is admitted thanks to a distinction of phases within the growth process. In other words, as in the dynamic of understanding of autonomy suggested by Hargreaves (1997), it would be a "matter of age". In the first development phase – that can be defined as "founding" – the identification with an idea of "Good", which is shared by the family and communities, would be necessary to create the future conditions of freedom and tolerance towards different visions and of the critical distance from the same roots regarded as "one's own". In the second phase, according to Hargreaves, for children to develop autonomy they must be gradually "exposed to other communities' values and their justification" (*ivi*, p. 511). So, for people to make the choices and decisions of the autonomous life, the first element – choice of school –, would play a positive role, but "action should be taken to ensure that the second element is not overlooked" (*ibidem*).

Even through the issue of individual autonomy, then, the argument of an educational pluralism respectful of and consistent with specific cultural and

religious identities offers a certain interpretation of responsibilities, which are shared among educative authorities, as well as among the school role in developing moral qualities of the young generations.

Final remarks. A “lesson” for state schools

Especially if placed under the terms so far reconstructed, the issue of school choice raises serious questions on various levels. It seems to me that one of the most significant considerations in this regard involves the quality of the offer of state schools and its credibility in the eyes of a population increasingly less aligned on a common understanding of education. In fact, the demand for denominational schools (we must also consider the so-called “*spillover effect*”¹¹) may find a reason exactly in the waiver – or the concealment – of contents value-oriented in education and the adaptive trend towards a merely instructive role shown in the past decades by educational systems of western society. Moreover, this trend can be read as the difficulty in understanding and translating a pluralized educative demand into a effective educative supply.

In other terms, the test of the recognition of diversities that raises the issue of school choice can be addressed, even before the search for political balanced solutions in the regulation of private schools, by rethinking of mainstream education in state schools.

This kind of thinking requires to sociology of education to recover a “classical” vision able to consider and query school education as a vehicle to build up a man, both in his subjective and social dimension, and to highlight its connections to the different interests and groups confronting in society. Moreover, if translated into a sociological vocabulary, even contributions provided in pedagogic and philosophical fields, preceding the slower resumption of sociological attention to the relation between school and normative models, may urge a new reading of the theme of education ideals to be shared in our societies and of individual qualities society should contribute to shape.

The attempt to face such question goes beyond this work. However, before closing, one can still sketch out one of the directories along which issues discussed up to now can enrich the social theoretical analysis and research on school education.

¹¹ Reference is to the exit from state schools by those students whose families are more attracted to schools openly closer to their traditions and beliefs (Macedo, 2000; Reich, 2007).

With a particular reference to the state school institutional programme in Italy, whose weakness is largely denounced, it is right to wonder which conditions – cultural approaches, relational experiences, organization and practices – allow the *common school* to exploit the wealth of differences it includes, in order to mould conscious and tolerant subjects, while facing anyway risks of cultural and identity confusion. Such questions require forms of *partnership* – cultural but also of institutional governance – generated by the school in its relation with students’ families and communities on the one hand, and, on the other, over tools – knowledge and skills – which the school must provide to young people in order to support their ability for deep and critical understanding of the differences in the making of their own identity. In other words, we can wonder that besides including and recognizing diversities on an egalitarian level, the state school in its educational project should create a clear “criteria” through which the same diversity can be “accounted for”, and achieve the fulfilment of subjects involved in the educational relationship and the individual qualities considered essential to public life. Generally speaking, a development of sociological research is desirable in order to analyze deep consequences of the *mixité* – or the so called “*school mix effect*” – on understanding knowledge and values within the adolescents’ identity building processes.

Finally, the discussed debate makes clear that there is a specific type of difference that must be recognized and taken into account in school education, the religious one. As we have seen, gather around this factor the most of the recent turmoil involving the European educational policies. The school choice issue suggest to state schools to “take seriously” religious differences, and ethic-cultural contents related to them. This theme is moving on an international level towards a desirable exploitation of cultural contents and personal experiences, which refer to the different religious persuasions (“education *about*” and “education *from* religions”), respecting at the same time the a-confessional and universalized nature of state school – see, for example, the OSCE’ *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools* (November 2007) and the Council of Europe’ Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 –. In Italy the point has just begun to be considered¹². However, it seems clear that on this table is playing one of the most significant bets for a state school which would

¹² See the proposal produced by F. Pajer and the group “Laboratorio sulle Relazioni Multiculturali e Multireligiose”: “Scuola pubblica e cultura religiosa in una società democratica e multiculturale”, VI Conference *Libertà delle religioni – laicità dello stato. Rispetto delle fedi, rispetto delle leggi*, Vallombrosa (FI), September 5th -7th, 2005. See also: Canta, 2006.

not only include diversities but also recognize their thickness and even allow a “complementary learning” (Habermas, 2005, p. 59) between them.

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